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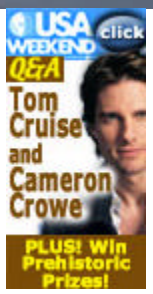

Sunday, December 9, 2001

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Day-trippers could be key

By MICHAEL SCHAEFER

Staff Writer

HOPING THE BUCKS STOP HERE

OOB: A minute to the beach
Dover: Woodman Institute, specialty shopping, fine restaurants
Durham: UNH, Whittemore Center events
Exeter: Closest N.H. stop for tax-free shopping, a romantic getaway.

As finalizing planrail officials are s to begin passenger train service next week, towns both on and off the tracks are hoping to benefit from more tourists and municipal improvements.

"We're trying to get a connection to the train. That's how Kittery will benefit," said Judie Kehl, chair of the Economic Development Commission for Kittery, Maine.

Kehl, public officials and business leaders in Kittery have discussed ways to capitalize on the train. She said she plans to create a task force to investigate possibilities for the community.

One option on the table is to begin trolley service between Kittery and the Dover train station.

Officials from the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority have met with community leaders monthly to prepare for the coming train.

Tourism officials said Boston is viewed as the gateway to New England. Once tourists arrive in Boston they can take the train to explore the rest of northern New England, said Larry Meehan, director of tourism for The Greater Boston Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Trains can be profitable for towns. A town with a train station can expect to get back $8 for every $1 it spends on rail, Kehl said. However, communities with downtown areas can expect to get

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back $39 for every dollar they spends on rail, Kehl added.

Because the start date for the train has been postponed numerous times, some communities, including Kittery, were caught off guard when service was officially announced.

"We weren't sure when the train was coming," said Jack Story, president of the Dover Chamber of Commerce.

However, he said now that the train has become a reality, the chamber has begun to work on marketing ideas.

"We want to be able to promote Dover and the things in Dover like the Woodman Institute, specialized shopping and restaurants," Story said.

We want to put the things together in a package so there is a reason to come to Dover, he added.

Before specific packages can be assembled, Story and many merchants want to see the composition of the train's ridership.

The Maine Department of Transportation with the rail authority have assembled ridership studies.

However, Story said once the train begins running, determining what the ridership is and where it comes from will be easier.

Their studies will help determine what the target audience is and where the advertising should be placed.

The Downeaster train will help Dover's growth, but the city will not live or die by rail service, Story said.

Exeter officials also are planning to offer packages, brochures and gift certificates.

"We are trying to promote tax-free shopping and the area as a romantic getaway," said Tracey McGrail, president of the Exeter Chamber of Commerce.

While marketers don't expect the ridership will deviate much from the early estimates, they are still planning their offers for consumers.

Some possibilities include marketing the town's history as New Hampshire's first capital and a plan to lure people out of Boston for tax-free shopping in Exeter.

She added that with a close train connection to Boston, corporations and executives may look more favorably at the community as a place to live.

Tom Higgins, chairman of the board for the Hampton Area of Chamber Commerce, said the group has discussed running a trolley service between the beach resort and the Exeter train station.

However, Higgins said they group wants to see how the train performs before they consider the service.

Tom Harmon, president of the Old Orchard Beach Chamber of Commerce said he is already touting the train as a means to get to the popular beach resort.

"The stop is right in town," he said. "It takes less than a minute to hit the sand."

The seasonal stop will be operated from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

Train executives also are planning to create some package deals for shopping in Freeport and Boston and have considered one day expanding lines northward to Freeport and Brunswick.

Wayne Davis, chair of TrainRiders Northeast, said future marketing plans could include shopping excursions to lure shoppers from Boston to Freeport.

He said currently about 40 percent of the community's 4.5 million annual visitors come from south Boston.

He said the demand for passenger service in Northern New England has been growing since the fist surveys were conducted in 1989.

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